

# The Minstrel

Redeemer University College's Poetry and Fiction Magazine



Volume 15, Winter 2004

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Some said, John, print it; others said, Not  
so.

Some said, It might do good; others said,  
No.

John Bunyan, “Author’s Apology  
For The Pilgrim’s Progress

## **Losing an Hour**

Just the other day we were laughing.  
Just yesterday . . . or the day before.  
Spring forward, and wouldn't you know it—  
we forgot to change the clock.  
How we laughed at ourselves,  
joking about losing our minds  
and becoming old coots.  
Just the other day.  
That's what I keep telling everyone.  
We woke up early, as always.  
He ate Grape Nuts with Equal  
and I had some decaf and an english muffin.  
We read the paper, trading sections.  
He flipped between sports games  
while I napped on the couch.  
Late afternoon, after supper it was,  
when we heard the newscaster say the time.  
It seemed too light to be so late.  
We both looked behind us to the clock on the wall.  
It chimed five times.  
How we laughed! It just seemed so funny.  
We went to sleep laughing,  
still forgetting to wind the hands of that old clock.  
When I woke up, he was cold beside me.  
Just the other day we were laughing.

## **Happiness**

She puts on her smile,  
The camera's rolling.  
Bright enamel; flashes from the camera.  
On the film she is never exposed  
Red-eye has been reduced.  
Barely a glimmer left in the portrait;  
Picture perfect.

She frames the film of deception;  
She remembers the smiles from family pictures.  
Roll after roll in spent film.

Click Click,  
The shutter flickers, she slightly shudders.  
Then she realizes – the camera simply looks,  
It doesn't see.

So she poses by “friends forever”  
Select the matte finish – finished.  
Fine photos of farcical merriment.  
Her film is finished. The camera is empty.  
Finally, a fitting picture.

## First Place - Fiction: Samuel Martin

### Barbara

"Did you oil that skin like I told you to?" Barbara's kerchief-covered, grandma-grey head bobbed and tilted to the right in her quizzical manner, a comically odd-duck interpretation of typical Oxfordshire reserve.

"Oh, yes," I lied, without really thinking of the question, as I pulled the *bohddran* from its case and set it up on my left knee to see what the damp, February weather had done to the tuning.

"Here, let me see," Barbara demanded as she held out both arms, fully expecting to be indulged just as she fully expected to be able to kiss complete strangers whom she could curtail into conversation for more than a few minutes.

I handed over the Celtic drum and she held it at hand's-length from the center, where the cross bars met, exaggerating the "proper" hold she had shown me the week before: "If you hold it like this you get a much better sound; see..." she said as she tapped the center of the sheep skin surface with her wrinkly, doll-sized fingers, "That's a much better tone since you oiled it! I can hear the difference!" She giggled as she handed me back the *bohddran*.

I smiled and felt a twinge of guilt, for having lied to an old woman, as I scanned the song list before the service began. While glancing through the order of service and testing rhythms by tapping my fingers on my pant leg, I looked over at Barbara who was chatting away to another young person she had grabbed by the hand and kissed into chatty conversation.

She's an odd duck; there's no other way to describe her, really.

The service began with the pastor strumming his plastic-stringed classical guitar to the rising tempo of the tit-tat-tittally-tat two/four rhythm of the jumping Jewish jingle "Jubilante!" which was followed by more traditional Baptist hymns, and capped, just prior to prayer, with the militant marching da-daa-dadada-daha-daa of "A mighty fortress is our God" to a staccato striking of organ keys that would have made Martin Luther himself drone in from beyond the grave with a low bass-line singing "A bulwark never fai-a-a-ling." That is, if Barbara's highbird voice hadn't quavered so loud that it drowned all angelic possibility out of the singing.

In spite of Barbara's wailing her praises to God – indeed, because of her charismatic squawking – it was the type of song service where one would have felt confidently cocksure, spiritually, with one foot in the church and the other in the pub, waving one hand like a battle standard in the air while swinging a fisted pint in the other!

So by the time we marched up to the Throne of God, everybody's spirits were swaggering with the drunken confidence of grace; the pastor announced the prayer time was going to be open for intercession and offerings of praise. The confidence that was poured out in the singing shriveled up into the reserve of British silence . . . until Barbara began to pray.

"Lord," she began and I looked through almost-closed eyelashes to see her doll's hands, pasted over with the tissue paper skin of old age, clasped with thumbs folded and fingers crossed. She was looking up through closed, blue-veined eyelids at the white-plastered, groin-vaulted ceiling of the old rail-side Baptist church, through which she saw God in heaven. Her face shone with sweat and glory as she mouthed words with the kiss-crazy thin lips of an eccentric old woman. She looked like an aged Madonna minus her Child. And when she prayed she spoke with crystal clarity, "Bless all our young men who are fighting the War in Iraq. Keep them safe and fight for them when they are too tired to fight this great evil of terrorism."

More British silence. I didn't blame them: after all, how do you follow up a request like that without making open prayer into a theological debate using The Almighty as a go-between?

"Oh, and Lord," Barbara broke the stiff silence to tack on her PS to God, "Thank you that that tyrant Saddam Hussein has been captured so now those poor Iraqi people are free. For this I thank You. Amen."

The cold English air seemed to freeze; the so-let-it be "Amen" from the congregation that traditionally

punctuated the end of a common prayer was absent, but Barbara didn't hear the silence because angels were singing in her head: "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war ...." The pastor began his sermon without ending the time of prayer with his apostolic "amen" and when he said, "Let's turn to Matthew chapter 5," Barbara just assumed she had missed his consenting benediction over her two prayers because she had left her hearing aid at home with her dentures and asthma puffers.

A sermon, forty-two minutes and six seconds later the congregation stood to say, "May the God of Grace bless you" as you stay for the customary tea, and biscuits. I took a cup of tea with a spoonful of sugar and sat down in the front row to talk to Barbara, who motioned to me to sit-and-give-'er-a-kiss while the lad serving the tea went to make her up a coffee.

She smiled when I sat down and it looked like the wrinkles of her bulbous cheeks would push her bifocals off the end of her round nose. "Now, how are you enjoying your stay 'ere in *this* country?"

"Oh, it's very nice," and cold.

"Oh! Isn't that lovely! You know, I always like it when other people appreciate *my* country; it makes me happy." She smiled and sipped her coffee, clucking her tongue on her toothless gums. And since I wasn't holding up my end of the conversation she lisped on: "You know, I have always liked you Canadians; did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," but I did like having my national pride assuaged.

"Especially you students."

"Really?"

"Oh yes! You are just as polite and kind and gentlemanly as the Canadian soldiers who came over 'ere in the Great War." When she mentioned the War, a grey cloud like a wispy cataract passed over her tiny eyes and was magnified twice and three times by her tri-focal lenses.

"The Second World War?"

"Yes," her grey eyes looked right through me, like I was three decades of transparent window panes looking into the magnified past.

"How old were you in the War?"

"I was a young woman then," her eyes came back to mine, "just outta' school and wearing skirts that showed my ankles! Oh, if the Sisters could have seen me then .... I was beautiful then," she nodded vigorously, agreeing with herself, remembering the mirror over the sink in the W.C. at her Catholic school, "and I had curly hair! Oh, the other girls were so jealous because they had to curl their hair with irons and, oh! that poor Beth!" Barbara grimaced at the memory. "Poor Beth tried to curl her hair with a hot iron but she burned it! And oh! The room stank like burnt hair for a week and poor Beth had to have her head shaved by the nuns and wasn't allowed to wear a kerchief like this one I have on because the Sisters said it was sinful to want curly hair and that nice straight-haired girls shouldn't want curls because curls were for harlots and they told me to do my hair up in a bun more than once but I always wore it down most of the time, except when Mother Superior was around, because it annoyed the nuns and I knew that God had given me curly hair and He thought I was beautiful. So when the War started and I left school I went off to Chippy to help in the factory and I tied up my hair in a bun there because it made me feel more like a soldier and less like a girl and not because any of the Sisters told me to."

"So you worked in the factories during the War?"

"Yes," she said and her wild eyebrows plucked up to make her eyes look like saucers behind her bifocals, "I worked in a woolen fabric factory in Chipping Norton for a bit because they had lots of people helping in London, at first that is, before the shortages came and demands from the front lines grew."

"I had an uncle who was on the front lines," I shot in the comment like a sniper looking for an open spot in the conversation.

"Oh! Where was he stationed?"

"I'm not sure exactly. He was in England for a bit, under Sam Hughes, before being shipped off to France. He was in the second boat to land on D-Day."

"On what beach?"

"Not sure."

"Where was he stationed in England?"

"I dunno really, he never talked much about the War."

"Well, what company was he with?"

"Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, I think."

"And his name?"

When I told her my uncle's name, Barbara clasped her hands and said, "Oh! It's happened again!" and I tried to distinguish between surprise, shock, and possible anger.

"What?"

"This happened before, you know."

No, I didn't know: "What happened before?"

"Take off your glasses."

I looked at her askance and raised an eyebrow.

"Come on, take off your glasses now," she said in her expectant give-me-a-kiss and let-me-see-your-bohdran tone, "Let's see what you look like."

I slipped my glasses off and looked, half smiling, half wondering what it was she was expecting to see behind the wire, feather-light frames.

"It's him," she said with honest grey eyes and doll-like fingers clasped in her lap, "It's him!" she almost screamed as her face cracked into a big toothless smile, "That's your uncle's face, you've got there." She nodded in agreement with her own statement.

I smiled and took another sip of my cooling tea, aware that I looked nothing like my late uncle's photographs and also painfully aware that I was carrying on a conversation with a senile old woman. Barbara smile at me and slurped her coffee, her eyes grinning.

"You know – "

I didn't know but I knew Barbara was going to tell me.

" – it's a good thing that we won the War."

It was probably one of the first sensible things she had said all day.

"Do you know what they would have done to me if that Tyrant had won?"

Her eyes went from grey to ice and her look made the chill of the old stone sanctuary creep into my bones. "What would have happened?"

"I was forty when I was married and a few years later I found out I couldn't have kids like most regular girls because something wasn't quite right inside and if I had been captured in the War then *that* Tyrant would have had me sold into a brothel or had me put down like a sick dog."

Barbara was looking at me with iced irises but she didn't see me or the church or my uncle's face masking mine; no, she saw a slow motion drama, on the white screen of her creeping cataracts, which played out in her mind's eye and came verbalized to my ear through her quavering voice:

"I still remember the day I chased that dog up the scaffolding to the top of that roof where the chimney pipes were burping up black coal smoke and the grey sky was close enough to reach up and rap on with my knuckles. Like the world was inside the great iron bolted belly of a jumbo bomber plane. And I slipped as I grabbed for the dog's collar. It was a good thing, too, because as I looked up I saw, in slow motion, a bomb fall out of an opening in the sky. It drifted through the air, just like my hand coming down to my lap, where it hit the bomb shelter across the road where I was supposed to be with the dog."

Somewhere in the greyness of senility there was a little orb of truth that was lurking like the sun in the clouded skies over England.

"I was lucky to be alive."

Yes, Barbara, you were ... are. Even the half life of old age is better than the nihilism found in the pools of blood and mounds of bodies that I saw on the news while I was on my midterm break in Spain. They don't show those images back home in North America or here on the BBC. When Barbara watches the 6 o'clock news with her cup of tea and two biscuits she doesn't see Iraqis being beaten into bloody pulps in the streets.

The happy, sing-song, public-party protests in Trafalgar Square – for a free Kurdistan ruled by and for the Kurdish people – are piece-together shots of a friendly, non-violent protest in the heart of a city screaming with a thousand voices that are calling out:

—Indian Cuisine!

—Fine Chinese Dining!

—Steak and wine for twenty pound sterling!

—Theatre of all kinds! Shakespeare! Beckett! Hugo's *Les Mis* to music! Operas with phantoms!

Ballets with sleeping beauties! And more; check the box office for ticket prices!

And while the neon lights turn London into nighttime New York or a European Vegas, and pounds sterling stream like blood from upper class pockets into capitalist coffers, beggars still sit under Ero's raised leg, and the great democratic West pisses cold and rain on the greasy heads of her own sons.

A world of injustices poured vinegared indignation into the open mouth of my mind as I sat there while Barbara stood up, packed her Bible away into the little bag slung over the two handles of her three-wheeled walker, and took my hand to draw me up to my feet so she could give me a goodbye kiss. "Now, I'll see you next week then and we can have another chat, you and I, and then you can tell me more about your studies here."

"Sure," I smiled.

"God keep you safe until I see you again."

"Yes, and you too," I said as she turned and hobbled down the isle where the pastor was waiting by the big oaken door with the hefty iron key in his hand: it was time to leave.

I took my coat from the back of the chair and shook the minister's hand as I walked out into the mizzling weather. Barbara was rounding the corner to the street where she rents a flat. From what I've been told by other elderly people in the church, besides the usual, "Oh, she's a character, that one is" and "You're never quite sure when she's telling you the truth or not" and "Believe everything you see in her eyes and only half of what she tells you" – besides these warnings and proverbs, the older folks of the congregation have told me that she gets just enough money from her scrimpy government pension to pay the rent and buy the basics for food, like the days of rationing during the War. The shadow of that era followed Barbara as she headed slowly up her street; the shadow was attached at her heels and it stretched back into memories of nice Canadian soldiers, falling bombs from German planes, and the distant rumours of a wicked tyrant across the sea, in a foreign land.

As I walked up the street to my hosts' house I thought of evil tyrants who have always lived across the sea. And I thought about how the Spanish dilute visions of blood with bottles of wine and how they shut out the day with curtains and siestas because the sun is too hot. I thought of streets in Barcelona where kids sleep on chairs in the streets outside their homes, waiting for their parents who are off in the music and cigarette-haze of all night parties spiced with shots of tequila. I thought of the ferry ride back to England from France – seeing the white cliffs of Dover in the mist – and getting back into the bus that had brought us, cloistered behind glass and breathing the reek of body odour, from Madrid, where a Greek couple boarded and sat in front of me. The lady asked, Sonny from Canada, you have girlfriend? because I have daughter who is PHD smart and speaks not two not three or five but *seven* languages! Hey you, she shook her husband awake, How many languages does 'dis daughter of yours speak? Seven! See. Ya, she speaks seven languages and can cook good enough to make you happy and fat like 'dis old husband of mine who does not speak to me on long bus rides to rainy England! And I chuckled at the antics of the couple who argued with each other *to* me. But my smile slipped when I remembered the delay when we docked in London, when the bus was searched by immigration officers who dragged off two Pakistani youths and an Oriental woman. The two young men struggled and cursed the immigration officers in Pakistani and broken English, enough to merit a less-than-surreptitious kick in the ribs when they were hauled off the bus. The Oriental woman cried as they ushered her off; she clutched her fake passport and wailed in Cantonese or Mandarin or Korean or some language that no one understood so no one could fully understand her fear as she was dragged off to be ... what? Strip-searched? Vaginally probed? For what? Hidden weapons? Sure. Because all Pakis and Chinks tote weapons in genital recesses and have detonators jammed up their rectums.

As I walked, my shoulders felt the weight of St. Christopher's burden but I wept silently, winding my way up the Cotswold street, because I knew I was no giant and the weight of the world was too much for me to carry alone. I knew God was with me. And with Barbara. And I prayed He was with the beggars who slept on the streets of Piccadilly Circus in London. And with the Spanish children who sat waiting on chairs for their parents to come home and tuck them in for afternoon siestas, where the sun would shine through drawn curtains like a full moon in the middle of the day. And I prayed for three immigrants who were dragged off the bus and smuggled into the anonymity and horror of the dispossessed. And I wished I could do more than just pray.

----

I see a bomb floating in slow motion, like my hand falling onto my lap, as I sit on a stone wall watching the sun set over Oxfordshire hills. The bomb hits the country across the sea, where I do not live. It explodes and leaves me alive, wondering why God blesses me and keeps me safe from tyrants while bombs explode in Iraq and pools of blood swallow up mountains of bodies and the whole country reeks of death. Why, in all this madness, am I allowed to wipe with toilet paper and shower with hot water? Will the bomb ever land where I am sitting? And will I live to tell the story? Will people believe it when I tell them? Or will they say "Oh, he's a character, that one is?" or "You're never quite sure when he's telling you the truth or not" or "Believe everything you see in his eyes and only half of what he tells you"?

## Second Place – Fiction: Daniel Horton

### “Transients”

Just a second ago, his wife was alive. The short Dutch man crumbles to his knees; his hands feel her shoulders.

A minute ago, they were walking beside the train, her arm in his. Then she paused to bend down and pick an orchid off the ground. She studied the fragile wonder, holding the delicate beauty as if it were a pearl of great worth. A small ghost, its intricate petals shone with a brilliant whiteness. He was amazed that she had found something so clean on the dirty train station cement. When she was done admiring it, she reached out to hand it to him. Then, as he accepted it, there was an abrupt explosion: everything was thrown. He found himself on the ground, surrounded by a cloudy haze of coughing, screaming and wailing. Quickly, as a crowd exits a theatre, the cloud dispersed. The human cries intensified; many were dead. He found his wife, her breath quenched.

Gasping for air and drenched in sweat, he tries to lift her up. She is too big and heavy for him. Pensive, he looks around. He doesn't want her to be here in the midst of this chaotic crowd; he wants her to have a peaceful rest. He could drag her, but he doesn't want to feel the embarrassment of that. He knows there is a small grass plot far from the tracks where, because of its obscurity, his wife will be left alone. He places his arms under her again. He knows that this time he must succeed. He breathes in, and then pauses. He sees the orchid, unscathed, next to her feet. He picks it up and places it on her stomach. Again, he tries to lift her; he fails and succumbs to dragging her. While he pulls the body, reality becomes distorted: the landscape transforms into a void, null and vacuous; an all-pervasive, all-embracing darkness blocks out light and sense. He struggles through the imperceptible stillness. A time out of time: all that exists is his moving; everything else is frozen, unaware or apathetic.

He is out of breath by the time he reaches the grass, away from the mess of people. He lays his head on her chest. He is tired, defeated. Struggling for oxygen, his lungs fight pressure as if he is in outer space being pushed and pushed, an infinitesimal silhouette conquered and quenched. It feels as if the universe is collapsing, regressing towards its infancy. All light, each movement and every point is fixed, held and then pulled by the unconquerable gravity of this enormous enormity. Everything shrinks and wraps, in and into, until all that remains is that ultimate, infinite curvature, that nothing before everything, that timeless time before time when all that can be viewed, in awe, amazement and wonder, can have no viewer. He weeps. His tears stream and stick, moistening his face. Sweaty, his palms, and empty, his soul. This is heartache; this *is* the loss of God.

He takes off his backpack and removes their honeymoon photo album. Two hours ago, they had been at her brother's showing off their pictures. He places the album next to her and places the orchid, the small ghost, on top of it. He removes a dime bag from his backpack. Quickly and expertly, he rolls a joint. He raises it to his lips, lights it and inhales steadily. His face becomes calm and ethereal. He closes his eyes and, a moment later, exhales. The cloud hovers between him and his deceased wife as a third, supernatural companion. It seems full of mass as the smoke from a jug of water and dry ice does. Even so, it vanishes, but a mist. And he knows that his life has come and will go just the same. But a mist.

He stands up. Before leaving, he bends down, searches her body and removes a dime bag from her back pocket. Thirty minutes ago, she was alive. Thirty minutes ago, he wasn't dead.

## i am the fallen man

...and this is who I have become.

Everything I am is a picture of everything I hate. Paint a new picture over me, paint a picture of the real me, the man I used to be. My heart is cold, and I'm lost without you. Tell me, why did you give me this choice, for I know that it was I that brought myself to this? So, what's your purpose now? Show me the meaning of my life. Wipe me clean, give me a reason to hope, that life is not what it seems; give me reason to believe that life is so much more than this.

Make me the mere reflection of You that I once was, because yet again I've failed myself. Show me the beauty of this pain. Fill me up, yet once again, so that my reflection may be that of you, and only you.

I come before you dirty, when I want to walk beside you clean. I am the fallen man, but when will I learn to fall at your feet? So take me, here I am, your fallen man. Rescue me, come make me clean; rescue me from my fallen state.

Neil Bos

## Hourglass

I'm sleepy, but need a story before bed and Mom to put icky-tasting polish  
on my nails so I won't bite. I write sentimental poetry in my  
hidden diary, call friends about sleepovers, and dream  
of being old enough. Kissing on the beach with  
my first fulfilled crush, through  
nail-gnawed fingers  
the sand falls.  
I toss the bouquet to  
laughing cousins. I am pregnant,  
working, watching T-ball, proud. I need  
vitamins before bed. My husband remembers my  
birthday dinner again, and flowers. In one minute I forget  
the names of my grandchildren and wonder where the time has gone.

Jacqueline Donkersloot

## Celia

I look at you through this incubator glass.  
Sweat has washed your nipple-sized smile.  
The whiteness of your mother's milk: gone.  
Your tiny body is red, alive with fire I can't douse and all I can do is watch your body behind this glass like a sinking ship in a bottle – out of my reach, beyond my touch lost in a blind fever, hell gone mad inside your three-month-old body —and all I can do is watch and wish that my hand was the pillow that props you up so you don't choke on your own vomit.  
I am a damp cloth, all wrung out with worry.  
Wishing that I could spread my body over you.  
And calm your burning fever with my death.

Samuel Martin

## In My Comfort

It is morning  
I am awake  
warm in my comfort  
A cool breeze breathes through my window  
the air is crisp, yet heavy with water  
It feels as though it will break  
and tears will cascade  
drenching the world

I pull on my raincoat  
walk down the stairs  
of this neutral building  
hold nothing over my head  
walk slowly  
walk in puddles  
overflowing my shoes  
bloating my socks  
bathing my pantlegs

I find some mud and step in  
cold squish over  
careful not to lose my footwear  
to the suction  
the dark brown licks my feet  
threatening to swallow

A robin hops on the grass  
near my mud-tub  
cocking its head  
and eying my suspiciously  
little does it know  
that standing in ankle deep mud  
somehow uplifts the soul  
and changes the meaning of contentment

I pull my feet from the mire  
and once again stand on solid ground  
I track the caked brown  
over the hills  
and back to my building

I sit on the walkway  
and undo my shoes  
they come off with a deep sucking noise  
I grab the top of my socks  
and peel them off as if they were  
extra layers of dead skin  
to find fresh and new underneath

I stand up  
roll my pants  
and walk through the door  
up the stairs  
and into my comfort  
again

Bonnie Sutherland

### **October in Quebec City**

Snow smothers the dying leaves  
that cover the Plains of Abraham.  
Her flakes dampen our windbreakers;  
she cuts short our tour of the city.

We wind up the mountain,  
as Snow gives way to Rain.  
She soaks our necks before her drops  
disappear into Les Chutes Ste. Anne.

We've grown accustomed to wet and cold,  
but hollow Wind will not give in  
She follows us home, seizes our breath,  
and carries Autumn to her waiting grave.

Robyn Konyndyk

## **Leah's Deathsong**

In this cave in the field of Machpelah  
I lie here beside the patriarchs, dead.  
The greenglow of death enshrouds Rebekah  
And Isaac, their spirits entwined have fled.

The weathered old white bones of Abraham  
Are laid out beside Sarah's small bleached frame.  
Even in death she holds her lover's hand  
And her lover, in silence, sings her name.

I can feel death's cold fingers claw my eyes  
But these bone socket wells are dry of tears.  
My flesh drips from my body, my skin cries  
For him whom my blind eyes won't see for years.

When they lay Jacob's corpse next to me,  
Will his worms caress, make sightless love see?

Samuel Martin

## **Like You**

I wish I could be  
like you;  
spontaneous, free,  
living life fully,  
no regrets,  
going on faith alone,  
defying expectations.

But I'm not  
like you ---  
one of us has to be  
practical.

Donna Dykstra

## **Grandfather's Clock**

Swirls of wooden waves  
climb  
the oak  
carved by grandfather.  
Ivy time hands  
over  
a blue universe  
of golden galaxy

point to four o'clock  
On  
time with  
time, the pendulum  
sways, as garden  
flowers  
in cool summer wind.  
Its melody reminds

of peppermint tea.

Cara Vlietstra

## Call Waiting

The phone rings at twenty past midnight, whining long enough to pinch Paul's wife from part-sleep by the third ring and sounding late enough to scare the hell out of the dog. She breathes hello into the receiver. Paul just waits. Good news never comes after twelve o'clock.

----

They'd been sitting this way all month — Maryke at the head of their kitchen table, swallowing tonguefuls of richly sugared tea and Paul sitting on a crooked chair, fiddling with the corner of the classifieds.

On this particular Sunday evening, a single synthetic thread of bright yellow light streams from the ceiling and the hanging lamp-head rocks as it's seized by the breeze seeping from the holes in the window screen. Raw, roving air permeates the purple curtains with the smell of sliced autumn grass and cold crickets. The television is but a muted flicker, buzzing over the methodic tick of the cuckoo clock that marks passing minutes with hollow clicks.

Maryke sips a rim of herbal steam, with her lips round and ready to pull back in a smacking slurp. She pokes her thumb into the center of the caramel-coloured liquid, deliberates its temperature and carries the mug back into the kitchen, putting it into the microwave where it spins with an electric purr on the glass plate.

"I just need it *real* hot," she says. "Almost boiling—but sippable. Can't stand it in the middle anymore."

Paul nods his patchy bald head, keeping to the columned page and soaking up all of those professional pleas—*looking, wanted, needed*—with pangs of sympathy and satisfaction. For the past hour he's alternated between pitying the "poor desperate bastards" and priding himself on holding a position of prison guard at the local young offenders' institution for almost twenty years. Of course, the nature of his sentiment depended on which beverage graced his lips, and the density of that drink.

Tonight, at ten-thirty five, it's rye and Coke. The mixture makes him increasingly calm and whispery and raises a round band of pooled redness to the balls of his cheeks, fixing his face into a boyish flush. She holds the handle of her mug with four firm fingers, each with brittle, bitten nails at their tip. The mug is the kind you can see through, made entirely of a thick thermal glass that's deceptively cool to the touch.

"You tire yet Paul-y?"

"Naw, not yet."

"Should we start making some calls?" she asks. She's almost whispering, too, her syllables slow and deep, as if to mechanically cover an oncoming quiver.

He stares at her, studying the pink permanence of her wrinkles. Her skin is so weathered, so creased with time and yet her eyes stay the same, pair of big blue-black pupils glistening beneath two spidery domes of long lashes. He notices, however, that her eyebrows have aged to slim grey bows—sparse arches that she pulls tight in anxiety.

"No—" he says, coughing a tiny bead of spit down his beard and onto the table. "We gotta at least wait till eleven before we start waking people up. They'll either hang up or get pissed off at us for waking 'em." He pulls a cigarette package from his back pocket, the box flat and shrunken like a half-empty pillow. Striking a single match, he lights a smoke before speaking. "Did Tawn say where she planned on spending the nights?"

Maryke rolls her tongue on her teeth and draws a slow breath.

"Maybe she only made it back to Buffalo. There are plenty of places to stay around there—motels mostly."

Paul's back tenses at the word, his spine instinctively taut. *Buffalo.*

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Tawny—Paul and Maryke's daughter—had been straddling that North American border line for three days now, all of her social activities whirling wildly around that town of busy, indistinct impermanence; the area was a trashy bevy of dimly lit bars, truck stops and gas stations.

It all started the summer of her senior year. Somewhere in between post-graduation gloom and impish eighteen-year old boredom, Tawny tumbled into the neighborhood's noisiest places, finding delight in the obnoxious crowds and unfamiliar faces that peopled the city's sections of subsidized housing. Surprisingly, one of these lively and overly friendly slack-houses could be found on her own street, beside the one-story home she shared with her two parents and Silas, her half-blind retriever.

The dirty red-bricked apartment building loomed its ten floors to the left of their bungalow's backyard, a towering figure that almost appeared lopsided if one looked upon it at an entirely upward angle. Lydia, one of Tawny's voluptuous and knocked-up high school friends, moved onto the first floor after accepting a job doubling as a lounge singer and bar tender at the sloppy, overcrowded hotel called The McGibbon. Since Lydia's yard was an untidy crib of garbage, cigarette butts and split patio blocks, she usually entertained Tawny and the crowd on her boyfriend Denny's balcony, all of them sitting, drinking and talking while staring out from the twisted porch rails. Lydia often cradled an old guitar, strumming random chords while the teenagers and twenty-somethings crooned off-key folk-tunes or mock love ballads.

Denny's place became a cage of dizzy, intoxicated birds caught in a chorus of nonsensical chirps. Sometimes, though, a reckless melancholy emanated from the yard, sounding more like the miserable and vulnerable tune of inmates harmonizing in a jail cell, all together crying their broken hymns through the bars.

By late August, around Tawny's nineteenth birthday, she spent at least six nights a week next door, usually spending the night. Oh, that racket. The neighbors hated it. Even more did her parents.

Nights began with Tawny's cracked, childish giggle floating from across the fence. The young partiers also raised a persistently garbled and restless clatter of beer bottles beneath the relentless booming hum of their voices. Soon the noise escalated into a throbbing, drunken din that pierced the entire street's serene summer dark.

After such nights, Tawny *would* stumble home. But she came changed. Mid-afternoon she would startle open the back door, dressed in frayed cut-offs and some low-cut cotton shirt painted with a band emblem or a cartoon character. Her favorite top was a sheer spaghetti-strap tank top, the fabric so translucent that Mickey Mouse's mischievous and toothy grin sat atop the faint black shadow of her bra.

The half-moon pockets under her eyes were almost always encrusted with chalky mascara residue and her raw throat rasped with a thin, irritable timbre when she tried to talk, turning to thistles she swore.

The following winter Lydia was kicked out, partly because she hadn't given her landlord a cent since September, but mostly because she threatened him with a two-tine shrimp fork she stole from a skuzzy seafood joint down the street. Just like that, she picked up and moved to Orchard Park, a town just outside of Buffalo with a reputable elementary school and a bustling farmer's market every Saturday morning. The noise from Denny's apartment dimmed to a dull and feeble clink of cups and tired conversation, Tawny contributing only sighs and whistling chuckles to the subdued murmur.

In a few weeks, Lydia miscarried, cut her hair into a short and sexy bob, and got a job working a tollbooth cubicle at a bridge a few miles from the border. She called Tawny in the breaks between the dry dangling of coins and civil conversation; she used a phone card she stole from Denny's dresser the morning she moved out.

A month prior to Paul and Maryke's restless Sunday night, Tawny up and left her family home, clutching the head of a Donald Duck key chain in her fist so that the two keys chimed like spare change. She pinned a note to the fridge, a scribbled set of directions written on an unfolded cigarette pack mapping the there and back as if to both assure her solid sense of road direction and to offer her parents the vague promise of a return on the last day of the month. She said she'd phone when she reached Lydia's basement apartment, or at least call home once on the way back home. Just as when she'd been eight years old, impulsively going to a friend's house after school, she signed her name with a spiraling loop on the end so that the last bend of the y looked as if it had grown a tail. The delicately drawn coil seemed to scream confusion and apology all at once, curving in a cursive shriek that whispered *I'm sorry*, then whimpered: *What must I do?*

**What must I do?**

----

Sunday night. Twenty after eleven.

Silas howls from the yard, singing from his chain.

Paul folds up the paper and reaches across the table to clasp two of his wife's fingers. Hands are strange, he thinks as he encircles her knuckles with his palm; you only notice the really beautiful ones or the extremely ugly ones. But here hers were, soft, even and completely average—as if they could have belonged to almost anyone.

“C’mom hon,” he pleads. “Let’s just get into bed. I’ve got the cell.”

She agrees, going first to shut the window where the screen’s now shivering with the echo of Silas’ bark and wet tremble of a coming storm.

Paul and Maryke tumble into bed, lying in each other’s warmth with their bodies unwinding like tired arms on a clock. Both of their minds roam between their pillow and the phone, a part of them willing it to ring but a piece of them also enjoying the soundlessness of the room. For the next hour they hang at the edge of sleep, twitchy, unsettled, unsure if it’s the presence of silence or the threat of sound that worries them most. They drift, restless—until the phone rings.

Adele Konyndyk

## Famous

You're famous  
someone slung-shot a diamond into your brain  
someone made a mold out of gold  
a suit of armour  
fashioned to fit  
and inlaid your new skin with sparkling gems  
they chiseled your mouth into the perfect grin  
buffed your surface  
cut back the stray ugliness  
pulled, ripped and injected  
thin,  
made a mud bath to wallow in  
and set your hair on fire

a glow  
for the whole world to know  
that you're the brightest star  
we've seen in years

Bonnie Sutherland

## My Town

Mine is a college town, one that comes to life when the leaves on the trees are dying. It is a small New England town even when the students have arrived, and the population shrinks when they leave. The town library is on campus. The librarians know the townies by name and cultivate relationships with them in the summer when the only day-to-day entertainment is reading. The ice cream shop does booming business with the tourists on their way to vacation destinations and with the ones (considerably pinker) returning home. When a new family moves in, the entire population brings welcoming gifts and, if there are children, all the teenaged girls offer their babysitting services. There is one coffee shop, one gas station/convenience store, one movie store (whose owner-operator lives in the apartment above it), and the police station, which is usually quiet.

There is a drive-in theatre which shows films only on Friday nights. They are films that have long since left the regular theatres in the big cities. On the last long weekend of the summer, classic movies are shown. *Casablanca*, *An Affair to Remember*, *Citizen Kane*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *King Kong* and various Charlie Chaplin films are all revived on the big screen. The parking lot is always packed full on this weekend. Beat-up pickups and shiny new mini-vans park in the back by the blue posts, and sports cars, sedans, and the occasional jalopy park closer to the screen, in the section with the raspberry-red posts. Children run around before the show starts, teens toss Frisbees and lay down in flatbeds, parents transform bucket seats into beds, and old couples sit close and share popcorn. When the sun has set and the sky blazes amber, indigo, ruby, and tangerine, everyone settles down and the movies begin. A sense of community and the crickets' song fills the air. Long after midnight, the last credits roll across the screen and cars leave their spots, filing two-by-two out into the night.

Every September, Haggarty's, the family restaurant where I work, is filled with students who have enough money in their pockets for pizza and a beer. I do my best to welcome the freshmen, who have a distinctive air of newness to them, regardless of how self-possessed and confident they appear. We have a special discount on wings during frosh week—twenty wings for four dollars. We move a lot of chicken in that first week, and the number of wings sold slackens only slightly as the year goes on. Haggarty's has a good reputation among students. It's got good food and is large enough to host a party, but small enough that the wait staff begin to match faces to "the usual" drink within a month. Every Halloween, Haggarty's hosts a costume party with prizes and half-priced drinks for the best-dressed couple, most inventive costume, and best use of recycled material. One year a girl won for a dress that she'd made entirely out of crushed pop cans. She didn't sit the entire night, and she ended up marrying Will, the waiter who brought her the rye and ginger that she ordered.

In November, the students bring textbooks and order coffee, and we stay open until the last of them is finished writing papers and cramming for tests. The building has booths for two, four, or six people, and stools at the bar for individual patrons. By the time winter exams are done, every student has been to Haggarty's at least once, and many have come back time and time again. Perhaps they seek comfort and warmth in a place that reminds them of home. Perhaps they just need to get off campus and ours is the closest place to go. Either way, when the second semester begins, many of these students have fallen in love with my town, small as it is.

When spring rolls around, the townspeople watch with mixed feeling as, one by one, the students leave. The librarians begin reorganizing shelves, the owner of the movie store collects late fines, and Haggarty's is the site of one last bash before everyone goes home. The trees push out blossoms, and the townspeople prepare for four months of relative quiet before the next school year swells our population again.

Amy Binder

